

Of the Use of Publick Instruction:

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A

SERMON

Preached at the

VISITATION

IN THE

PARISH-CHURCH

OF

Great Torrington in Devonshire,

ON

MONDAY, *April 10, 1738.*

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Vicar of ABBOTSHAM, DEVON.

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PSALM li. 12, 13.

Restore unto me the Joy of thy Salvation: and uphold me with thy free Spirit.

Then will I teach Transgressors thy Ways, and Sinners shall be converted unto thee.

THE Zeal of a right Penitent shews itself throughout the whole of this mournful Hymn of King *David*; but in the Words that I have now read, that Zeal seems to have excited the Spirit of the *Prophet*. How long the *Prophet* might have lain dormant in the Prince lately engaged in criminal and unhappy Intrigues, is not material to enquire: But it is plain that *Nathan's* warm Application to his Conscience had stirred and agitated the whole

Man, and brought him to a thorough Recollection of himself, under all his Characters and Capacities ; that of the Prophet or Teacher, as I said, in a particular Manner. He is not satisfied with resolving on his own Reformation and Amendment, but will, in his publick Capacity, turn Sinners, like himself, to God, and *teach Transgressors his Ways*.

THE Errors of Persons in publick Stations cannot rightly be amended, without a due Regard to the Influence they may have had upon those under their Care. Whilst they that act in a private Way of Life have less need of extending their Views far beyond themselves, as their Vices or their Virtues are not likely to operate out of the Limits of their own Obscurity : Though the Lapses of the Meanest will ever be considered by him that is truly penitent for them, with all the probable ill Effects they may produce, as far as they are observed or known. This undoubtedly made the Prophet *David*, as he is called by some, for the pious Instructions in his divine Songs, as well as King *David* at other Times, so much concerned to repair, according to his Power, the

the Wrongs his Misconduct might have done the People. He would teach them the Doctrine of unfeigned Repentance, turn the wicked Man from the Sins that he had committed, and admonish him to do that which is lawful and right, that he might save his Soul alive.

It is not only a general Principle in a Mind rightly seasoned with Virtue to propagate Virtue and Goodness as much as possible; but in case of a shameful Failure, the Mind, when it begins to return to its right State, doubles that Zeal for the Good of Mankind; as the Sun, when it has been clouded, delights to spread its Rays far and wide over the Places that have been deprived of their cheering Influences. But to consider how much the Teaching Character suffers in its Honour by the Vices of those that bear it, may not be very pleasant; nor what additional Pain and Labour a flagrant Crime gives such a Sort of Penitent as the Author of this Psalm; how much more difficult, and, perhaps, less successful, it renders his Endeavours to instruct Mankind. I shall therefore here drop the Penitent, and pursue
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the Prophet or Teacher only, in my farther Thoughts on this Subject.

OUR learned Adversaries might easily prove us an useless Order of Men, if they could as easily prove the human Understanding, in its own Nature only, a perfect Faculty : I mean, a Faculty capable of rightly directing us in all our Actions, without any foreign Cultivation and Improvement ; and also of keeping us steady in our Prosecutions of Right and Good, without any Danger of erring from this right Way, and so as never to need any Admonition or Correction from without. But till this is proved, it must be allowed that there is both Room and Reason for Admonition and Instruction ; and that it may not in any Age or State be improper to permit, at least, if not appoint a Set of Men to the Office of directing others. But that the divine Institution of Persons to this Duty may be deduced from this Principle, supposed to be founded in Nature, I will not at present pretend to say ; only just hint the Necessity or Usefulness of conducting the human Mind to Truth and Goodness.

THE Soul of Man is, undoubtedly, the noblest Work of God with which we are acquainted. We dare prefer it before the Sun, with all its Light, Heat, Beauty and Serviceableness: Because the Sun, to our Perceptions, has neither Thought nor Consciousness; can neither reason nor reflect; but is as insensible of its own Perfections as the stupid Rock or Tree upon the Mountains. But the Soul of Man is capable of reflecting on itself. And yet it is no Disparagement to the Soul, or its great Author, to suppose it needs Care and Cultivation; any more than to suppose that the best Piece of Ground will not produce the best Fruits, without the Improvement of the Husbandman. The same great Author has placed it in that Neighbourhood to, and union with, Body, from whence arise Sensations and Affections that require Management and Regulation; that call for the proper Culture of Wisdom and Instruction. Hence the Difference betwixt the Child and the Man, the Clown and the Scholar, the Savage and the Philosopher. How does the Child become a Man? He observes and reasons, is taught and instructed as he grows in Years. The Clown, removed from the Country into the School,

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will take, as it were, a new Nature, attend to Lessons of Wisdom, and turn out a judicious Critick, an ingenious Writer. And the Discipline of a *Socrates* might have made a *Plato* of a young savage *Hottentot*, supposing him of equal Parts, as well as of the Son of *Ariston*. Nor does the supposed Inequality of Parts or Capacity at all affect the Truth of this Principle: Whether we imagine an Equality of Souls, and that the Difference arises from the different Organization of Bodies; or else that the Souls themselves are variously formed, and have that Difference of Capacity in their own Nature. Either Way, and upon either Supposition, the Usefulness, and even Necessity, of this foreign Cultivation of our Understandings is evident. What makes the Man of the Child? Not his Years and Stature; with these alone he might be at twenty as much Idiot as the Infant: And it is the School and the Philosopher which alone can form the Peasant and the Savage to good Sense and Wisdom.

BUT these Things may not seem to be so very near to the Purpose of teaching Transgressors the Ways of God, and turning Sinners
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to him, set forth in the Text to be more especially the Business of the Teacher of Virtue. Let us therefore take a short view of him considered as a Monitor.

THE native Bent of Man's Mind is to Truth and Goodness, to Virtue and Order ; as the Fountain tends to the larger Stream, the Stream to the River, and the River to the Sea. But as the Waters of the Fountain and Stream are often obstructed in their natural Course, and sometimes dissipated and lost ; so the Mind is obstructed in its right Tendencies by what Holy Scripture calls Affections and Lusts within ; by wrong Precept, Education, Example and Custom without. And from hence flow Vice and Irregularity : Hence are bred Transgressors and Sinners, so called in the Text : Hence arise the different Characters of Good and bad ; the various Degrees of Virtue and Vice, to which Men's good or ill Conduct raise or depress them : Hence comes that very unhappy and widest Difference betwixt the best and the worst Men : A Difference so great, that they seem at length to be almost of another species ; and

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that betwixt the honest Man and the Villain we may say the odds is almost essential.

THE Direction of the Mind at first, and the conducting it in its proper Course, is of vast Use to prevent these Irregularities. But in spite of this we find by sad Experience that it too often fails of the expected Issue: That the learned Head is not always coupled with an honest Heart, and that the Man of Sense and Ingenuity is not always the exactest in his Morals.

HE that pretends, indeed, that the Wisdom of Man is of itself sufficient to correct these Disorders in the moral World betrays as little Religion, as he that affirms Nature to be maintained in its Course of Operation, regular as it is, without the Concurrence of a superior Mind, infinitely wise and knowing. But as in the Course of Nature, we see proper Causes produce their proper Effects, under the Agency of the governing Mind; so no right Religion can ever persuade us that Counsels and Arguments, Exhortations and Admonitions, are wholly useless in the Regulation and Correction of Manners, under the Direction

tion of the same divine Mind : And the Instances that might be produced of the happy Effects of them are abundant Proofs of their Usefulness. We need only wish they did more abound.

WHEN a Man is arrived at a very high Degree of Diffoluteness, lost and abandoned, as we say, to all Goodness, the Success of the best Advice is not often very considerable. But even with respect to such Characters and Dispositions, we will allow all the proper Influence that Hell and the Devil, Racks and Gibbets, may have upon them : Yet could they be brought, according to the Satyrist, to see Virtue, they might possibly as much repine at the Loss of it, as tremble at the apprehended Punishment of their Vices. And indeed where any Thing that is ingenuous remains in the Soul, this Sight or Knowledge of Virtue, which they have unhappily abandoned, cannot fail of breeding the most cutting Remorses ; the natural Effects of which will be ardent Wishes and unwearied Endeavours to repair the Loss e'er it become irreparable. In such a Case, to have Virtue displayed in all its amiable Lights ; with its

certain Attendant Happiness ; with the peaceful State of Soul it necessarily procures ; the Self-congratulations that flow from right Reflections on it, and the eternal and never-failing Joys that follow it ; is not unlikely to be, in some Measure, useful and efficacious.

THAT real Reformation and solid Virtue sometimes owe their Beginnings to Fears and Horrors, we can neither doubt nor deny ; when *St. Paul* so expressly says, *Knowing therefore the Terror of the Lord, we persuade Men* *. But that they produce many sham Repentances, is too evident from the Vows of Sailors in a Storm, and those of sick Men under the Apprehensions of Death ; which are commonly as soon forgotten as the Causes of their Terrors are removed, and die away with the Recovery of Health, and the Restoration of Safety. Therefore it is that the Slave is represented, by the wise Poet, as forbearing to transgress for the Fear of Punishment only ; whilst the ingenuously virtuous Mind hates to do Evil from the Love he bears to Goodness. And indeed the Virtues of a Mind thus enslaved by Fear, if they may be called Virtues, seldom rise higher than

* 2 Cor. v. 11.

than to be of the negative Kind : ceasing to do Evil from the Apprehensions of the fatal Consequences of an obstinate Perseverance ; but not learning to do well from the inward Self-satisfaction, and all the noble and generous Pleasures, of Well-doing.

IT may be said, that vulgar Minds, like those of Children, are to be awed and terrified into right Obedience, as not being capable of such refined Thoughts and Speculations on Virtue ; that such Thoughts are more proper in Theory, than useful in common Practice. But have these vulgar Minds no Passions of the soft and gentle Kind ? Are there no Addresses to be made but to their Fears ? Are they not capable of admiring, loving, and strongly affecting ? Do they in no Ways of common Life pursue Objects of Affection and Desire, as well as fly those of Dread and Terror ? If they do, they must be allowed to be proper Subjects of the more generous and tender Sort of Discipline. Their softer Passions may be touched ; their nobler Affections may be wrought upon ; and their wandring Feet reduced by a gentler Leading than that of Force and Fear, Violence and Compul-

Compulsion. The Love of Right and Good may by the Methods of Lenity be formed in them ; and they brought to affect their Duty, as well as dread the Consequences of Disobedience : That they may run the Ways of God's Commandments, when their Hearts, according to the holy Psalmist, shall feel a divine Liberty and Enlargement.

BUT still, all this may be reckoned talking to no Purpose. We may be thought to magnify ourselves upon nothing. We may be asked by our learned Adversaries, Where are those Trophies of your Doctrine and Discipline, your Instruction and Correction ? Those Transgressors reclaimed ? Those Sinners amended ? Those Brands plucked out of the Fire ? Are Mankind better than they have been formerly ? Is there not now more Corruption and Vice, more Degeneracy from Good, and Depravity of Manners, than in any past Age or Ages ?

TO this we may answer, first, Perhaps No. And it will be found difficult to prove that Mankind, in general, have in any Age been better than they are at present. But
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suppose it could be proved, it will not therefore follow that the Inculcation of Virtue, the Regulation of Manners, the Correction of Errors and Misconducts, are neither now, nor ever will be, of any Use to Mankind. It will rather appear upon due Examination, that the World has always been obliged to the Teachings of the Wise and Virtuous, for much of its good Sense and Morals: And that it may not be so now, is not so easily proved as said.

BUT, perhaps, we may by some be acknowledged to be of use to the vulgar and viler Part of Mankind; and still be thought of little Significancy to great Persons, learned Heads, wise Men, wiser far than their Teachers.

I will not say any Thing, on this Article, of what need such Persons may have, or think they may have, of Confessors and Absolvers: They may use these as they please and like. But they themselves, supposing in them the Wisdom before supposed, will not think themselves infallible, and liable to no Errors. And certainly a wise, great, and good
Man

Man was never known lightly to esteem an honest Adviser. Such a Person, rather, will at all Times receive graciously a mannerly Censure of a Misbehaviour; a friendly Hint of a Duty or good Office in Life or Religion, proceeding from a really honest Intention; though he may, at the same Time, perceive some Impropriety or Awkwardness in the Manner and Address. Hence the wisest and best great Men have ever chose discreet and honest Counsellors to be near their Persons.

I do not mean by this, that the Ministers of Religion should be fond of intruding themselves into the Politicks of Princes. Let such prescribe to themselves the proper Persons for Privy Counsellors. Nor do I censure the Admission of our great Men in the Church to a Share in the Legislature. These Things may, for me, remain as they are or shall be; and if I should be thought to make any low Reflections upon them, in reality I intend not to make any.

BUT, as *St. Peter* says of himself, and probably with regard to his Brethren Apostles,
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considered in their teaching Capacity; that they stirred up Men's pure Minds by putting them in Remembrance; so no wise Man, however great, would chuse to be without a good Remembrancer: Considering, that the Wisest are not so at all Hours; that the Best may commit a Slip or Blunder; and that, in such a Case, even a weak Assistance is better than none at all. In short, no Body rightly weighing the common Infirmities of human Nature would refuse a Lift when down, or a Refreshing of his Memory, when at a Loss in recollecting.

FOR these obliging and friendly Offices of Humanity, what can dispose us like the Joy of the Salvation of God? All the good Spirit and Humour of Virtue in the Heart, and an Inclination to diffuse and communicate them to those around us; an even State of Mind; Tranquility and Serenity of Soul, founded on conscious Integrity, flowing from a Sense of right Intentions and right Actions; the easiest Situation of the Thoughts; the highest Pleasures of the Man; the noblest Enjoyment of the Christian on this Side his Heaven, ere he has passed the Gulph
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of Mortality ; vastly better felt than described, even after we may have read all that the *Stoicks* have wrote about Calmness and Tranquility.

THE Joy of the Salvation of God banishes all cynical Sourness, and morose Austerity ; Introduces good Temper into Religion, as well as Life ; and removes the Clouds and Darkness that are formed by those, who give us nothing but the most melancholly Representations, and unjoyous Prospects, of Virtue.

IT is the Fancy of some ever to dress her in Sackcloth and Mourning ; to wrap her up in Shades ; or exhibit her in the most hideous Colourings and Distortions. As if a good Man was never to see the Sun shine, or enjoy a pleasant Day. Poor Recommendations of what is really best and most beautiful ; of what has every Charm that may engage the Heart ; and comes attended with Offers of Peace in this Life, and Pleasures to Eternity.

I do not mean to disparage the Sacrifice of a broken and contrite Heart, which is represented

sented in this *Pſalm* to be ſo acceptable to God: nor to condemn the proper Humiliation of a Penitent; the *godly Sorrow* *, as *St. Paul* calls it, which worketh Repentance unto Life. The beſt have Occaſions enough in Life to confeſs their Faults to God, and demit themſelves before him, in the wholeſome Diſcipline of afflicting and circumciſing their Hearts to his Fear. What outward or bodily Exerciſes they may think fit to preſcribe themſelves, as tending to inward Purification, they may be indulged in; taking Care that they do not degenerate into Superſtition. Fasting and Abſtinence are of great Uſe to the Health of the Body; and ſo to repair and fit it for the Service of God in the World. But that Perſons of good Senſe ſhould imitate that ridiculous grimace Fasting, if it ought at all to be called Fasting, which conſiſts in abſtaining from the viler Meats to feed upon thoſe that are the moſt delicate and luſcious, is a ſtrange Abſurdity.

AFTER all, though it be a proper Part of Chriſtian Humility to afflict and rend the Heart before God, on the ſad Occa-

* 2 Cor. vii. 10.

fions of Sins and Lapses ; it is certainly not a very worthy Opinion of the benign Deity to imagine, that he can take any Pleasure in the Sorrows and Miseries of poor Mortals. One would not willingly conceive worse of him, than of a good Prince ; who is never thought good for taking Pleasure in the Distresses of his Subjects. The Communication of his own Happiness should ever be esteemed the highest Complacency of the supreme Being. He delights in the largest Diffusions of Good ; the most plentiful Distribution of Grace and Favour ; the universal spreading of the Joy of his Salvation. The whole Earth is full of the Goodness of the Lord.

THE Upholdings of the πνεῦμα ἡγεμονικόν (as the Seventy render it) the free Spirit of God, may, in one Sense, be supposed to be peculiar to King *David* as a Prince : The Spirit of Governing and worthily presiding among the People. But in the other Sense, that of guiding and leading, it may be applicable to the instructing Character in general. Nor would we arrogate to ourselves too much of the governing Spirit ; since common Experience shews us, in
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most Cases, that by grasping at too much Men oftentimes lose all. Generally speaking, all Powers and Privileges pertaining to an Office are best secured by a strict Attendance on its proper Labours: And we shall find that, for the most Part, our Reception will be more cordial under the Notion of the Helpers of Mankind's Joy, than that of having Dominion over their Faith. These are *St. Paul's* own Words*; who, perhaps, might have claimed spiritual Authority in an high Degree, if he had not thought it more for the Advantage of Mankind to act the Part of a Guide of the Blind; a Light of them which are in Darkness; an Instructor of the Foolish; a Teacher of Babes.

It will, no doubt, be expected, that we observe concerning this Sense of the free Spirit of God, which relates to guiding or leading those we instruct; that it imports something more than pointing out the Way to Virtue at a Distance: That it includes Actions as well as Words; and that we ought in reality to lead the Way for Mankind to that Happiness we proclaim.

* 2 Cor. i. 24.

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AND, on this Head, I shall not take much Pains to obviate the common Objections, and quell the Clamours sometimes very loudly raised against us, by pleading the Infirmities of Human Nature; by urging or insisting largely on the Expression in Holy Scripture, that this Treasure of Instruction is laid up in earthen Vessels; and that even the inspired Teachers acknowledge themselves to be Men of like Passions with the rest of Mankind: But only take Notice of one common Error in the Conduct of some Persons of Sense and Fortune, namely, that of having Men's Persons in too great Admiration, through Foible or Fancy.

THE Appearance of a Person of more than common Parts, or very extraordinary Piety, draws the Regards of the World. His Eclat strikes the Eyes, and his Virtues procure him the Favour of the Great and Good. He commences somewhat more than Man, and soon rises to an Angel. He is caressed and adored, and Honours, not much less than divine, begin to be paid him. But after some Time, whether through a too great Elevation of his Spirits on his high Applauses; or the Fickleness

Fickleness of his Admirers; or, rather, because a near and intimate Acquaintance discovers all mortal Men to have their Weaknesses; the Angel is missed, but the Man is found. Hence flow frequently Coldness and Disaffection, and sometimes Defamation and Scandal.

THIS and many other Cases may be supposed; and Mankind will judge of us as they list. But whatever Views we may all of us have to the Emoluments of the World, because we are not made to live by the Spirit only; whatever Difference of Parts and Capacities may be found in us; whatever Variety of Opinions in speculative Religion, for we shall never think all alike in Matters of mere Speculation; whatever different Side or Party we may be thought to favour in Politics; it will still be no great Stretch of Charity in Mankind, to believe it our common and general View to lead the Way for them to everlasting Happiness.

F I N I S.

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